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SUBJECT: AKBAR GANJI'S SENTENCE UP MARCH 17

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CLASSIFIED BY: Jason L Davis, Consul General, Dubai, UAE.  
REASON: 1.4 (d)

1.(C) Summary: Iranian political prisoner Akbar Ganji is eligible for release March 17. It is not yet clear whether he will be released or whether the government will find a reason to keep him in jail. If he is released, he may be "asked" to leave the country. A human rights activist is calling on the USG to send Iran a clear message of its continued concern about Ganji's fate, as well as to do more with Iranian dissidents who have left Iran in recent years. End summary

2.(C) According to Iranian press, political prisoner Akbar Ganji's six-year prison sentence expires March 17. A U.S.-based official from Human Rights Watch (in the UAE to prepare a report on migrant labor in UAE) told PolEconChief it was likely Ganji could be brought up on new charges related to his anti-regime writings smuggled out of prison. (Note: In Iran it is not uncommon for political prisoners to be sent back to prison on new charges after their release.) The official urged the USG to publicly call for Ganji's release. He said the Iranian people get confused when the USG takes up a human rights case and then drops it. He added the Iranian government counts on us losing interest or getting distracted. In an open letter February 20 published online, Ganji's wife says Iranian officials have abandoned him in solitary confinement in a prison section controlled by IRGC intelligence, despite his continuing health problems. She writes that they are trying to forget about him and are trying to get the public to forget him as well.

3.(C) An Iran-based political and economic analyst predicted, in contrast, that Ganji would likely be released at the end of his sentence and asked to leave the country. Bijan Khajepour (please protect), who recently spoke on Iran at a number of Washington think tanks, told PolEconChief that this prediction was based on the government's behavior in similar cases in the past. He cited dissident journalists/former political prisoners Massoud Behnoud, who now writes for Rooz.online, an online newspaper based outside of Iran, and Ebrahim Nabavi, an exiled satirist who now writes for the Internet site Gooya, as well as Rooz.

4.(C) When asked why the Iranian government would allow Ganji to leave, Khajepour said Iranian officials are only afraid of people they think have credibility in the eyes of both the elite and the wider population and who can thus mobilize the masses. The government believes dissidents lose this status once they leave the country.

5.(C) The HRW official shared the view that the Iranian government believes dissidents become inactive or ineffective when they leave the country. The HRW official blamed the lack of a good network to absorb Iranian dissidents abroad and make effective use of them as part of the problem. The Iranian government knows that as new immigrants, they will likely have to devote most of their efforts to getting by economically (the HRW official cited a famous Iranian cartoonist who still publishes on Rooz.online, but works nights in Canada at a drycleaners to make ends meet.) The HRW official also accused the Iranian government of threatening the families of expatriate dissidents, citing the case of a blogger who initially spoke out against the government after he was allowed to leave the country but then went mute after his father was detained in Iran. The HRW official pressed the USG to make better use of this new wave of Iranian dissidents abroad, perhaps by employing them at VOA's Farsi television program.

6.(C) Comment: We agree that now would be an opportune time for the U.S. and others to remind the Iranian government that the international community continues to follow Ganji's case and expects him to be released when his sentence is up. Although Iran prickles when it feels it is being told what to do, there have been several cases in recent years when it has buckled under public pressure on human rights cases. It is hard to say what the short-term impact past USG statements on Ganji's case have had, but the majority of our interlocutors believe that overall, public statements on specific human rights cases in Iran yield long-term positive results. There may be elements of the government looking for an excuse to keep Ganji under lock and key. Other parts, however, may recognize that releasing him after his sentence is served does not cause them to lose face and can in fact get rid of one albatross around their neck in the eyes of the world community.

7.(C) Comment continued: We think there is merit in the idea of recruiting more newly-arrived Iranian dissidents to work on VOA's expanded Iran programming, although those people who hope to return in the near future to Iran are unlikely to want to

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affiliate themselves so closely with the USG. We would also suggest searching out dissidents from Iran's various ethnic groups to help produce programming in their native languages to target those populations.

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